

Good News of Jesus Christ, Son of God

Second Sunday of Advent

Sunday 10th December 2017

Mark 1:1-8

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It seems as though the gloves are off in Washington as accusations of treason fly around. Here Hilary Clinton's former campaign manager claims Donald Trump's senior advisers should be tried for treason if it is proved they colluded with Russia to influence the outcome of the US presidential election.

Now, that's a big call. Treason is a serious offence in anyone's language. But it doesn't stop here. A few months ago a former White House advisor to Donald Trump suggested Hilary Clinton had committed treason back in 2009 when she supported the sale of a mining company possessing uranium deposits in a country close to Russia.

However, it's not just in the USA that we hear such accusations. Here in Australia a petition has been set up on web site calling on the government to charge the NSW Senator, Sam Dastyari with treason over his alleged dealings with a Chinese business tycoon.

Then, back in October, the Australian newspaper columnist, Jennifer Oriel, accused an ABC broadcaster of "soft treason" concerning allegations of war crimes directed at Australia's elite SAS troops operating in Afghanistan.

Such accusations point to the "rough and tumble" of political life both in Australia and overseas where the line between robust scrutiny and defamatory comment is almost indistinguishable.

But today we do, indeed, encounter treason in its most direct form. And it occurs in, off all places, in the Bible as we read the opening words of Mark's Gospel.

Let me explain.

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

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Now “Son of God” sounds innocuous enough. But in ancient times emperors and kings were believed to possess direct relationships with the gods. The Emperor of China enjoyed the title “Son of Heaven” while rulers in Central Asia, including Genghis Khan, were known as “sons of God”. Egyptian Pharaohs were also known this way. Meanwhile, in ancient Rome, Julius Caesar was formally deified some 40 years before the birth of Christ and his adopted son, Augustus, took the title “son of God”. Subsequent emperors continued to take this title.

With this in mind, Mark’s Gospel does something quite remarkable. In these very opening words of the Gospel, Mark launches out with the declaration that Jesus, not Caesar, is ruler. Mark announces that Jesus, not the emperor, is sovereign. Jesus, not the Roman monarch, is Lord of all. Jesus, not the imperial leader of the day, is the “Son of God”.



Now, this is a serious challenge to Rome’s authority. This is a critical, far-reaching assertion against an absolute imperial power. For, no longer is the emperor sovereign. There is a higher authority who rules the creation despite Rome’s brutal, uncompromising grip on the nations. And, friends, such a manifesto effectively amounts to high treason!

But there is more.

Mark speaks of the “good news”. Now, again, this seems harmless enough. But in the original language of the New Testament this “good news” is “euaggelion” (pronounced: yoo-ang-ghel'-ee-on), a Greek term used at the time to refer to the magnificent achievements of the emperor, particularly in battle and in the conquest of others.

N.T Wright, a well-known New Testament scholar, says the word ‘gospel’ was also used in connection with the celebration of the accession or the birth of a king or emperor.

In other words, throughout the world of Mark’s day “gospel” referred to news about the emperor. It was a term designed to glorify the autocrats of the day and to present them as super-heroes, people who were totally in control and capable of just about anything.

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“Euaggelion”, “good news” or “gospel” particularly marked the birthday of a god-king or the beginning of this god-king’s reign. So the birthday of the Emperor Augustus, for example, was considered to be the beginning of the gospel in the Roman world.

We know that, around nine years before the birth of Christ, an edict was issued by Rome. This referred to the birthday of Augustus Caesar as the beginning of a new era, an era of Pax Roma that heralded peace and salvation for all people. With this came an instruction to start a new calendar system based on the emperor’s birthday.



You may be able to see what’s going on here. Mark appropriates the title “Son of God”, currently attributed to the emperor of the day - and this title is attributed to Jesus.

Secondly, Mark appropriates the concept of “euaggelion”, “good news” or “gospel” as a means of the telling the story, not about Caesar, but of Jesus, a humble, compassionate person from the backblocks of Galilee.

Moreover, Mark appropriates the term “gospel” to announce a new era, a new reign, a new order that is beginning. And this does not concern imperial Rome. This does not concern the reign of a new emperor. Rather, it concerns Jesus – Jesus the anointed one - Jesus the Christ.

These are huge claims. They are claims which declare the identity of one who is greater than Caesar. They proclaim the onset of new age that sees the strength of Rome and the vast victories of its emperors fade away into oblivion. They set in motion a new vision and a new way of being that does not promote, wealth, power and prestige. Rather this is a vision, this is way of being that is grounded in love, mercy and grace.

Friends we are now journeying through that time of the year called Advent. This is a time of preparation and waiting as the birth of Jesus and the coming of our Lord nears. But, in a real sense, Mark’s Gospel simply short-circuits all this.

There is no long period of preparation, there is little waiting in Mark’s Gospel. Rather, Mark launches straight into a declaration of who Jesus is and what Jesus’ mission is all about.

There is no baby talk here. There is no virgin conceiving a child, there is no Joseph, there is no journey to Bethlehem, there is no inn with a rough stable out the back, there are no shepherds in the fields, there are no angelic choruses and there are no magi or wise men.

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All this is by-passed as Mark makes a clear, concise, strong statement about who Jesus is. Mark then presents us with John the Baptist in the wilderness and almost immediately Jesus appears on the scene to commence his ministry.

Just imagine if Mark was the only Gospel we had? There would be no actual Christmas as we celebrate it today, there would be no baby Jesus, no nativity scene, no angelic chorus, no bright stars, no Christmas parties, no Christmas dinners, no Christmas shopping, no traffic jams in Carlingford Court and no opportunity to listen to those Aussie Christmas jingles like “Dashing through the bush, in rusty Holden Ute”, and, perhaps, not even a Boxing Day cricket test.

With these things in mind, I believe there is something deeply earnest and alluring about Mark’s Gospel. For, Mark doesn’t mess about. Mark gets to the point. And Mark packs a punch!

This is because, for Mark, the coming of Jesus is all about regime-change. It’s all about transformation and renewal. The coming of Jesus marks the beginning of a new age where the power, the supremacy and the brutality of imperial Rome is subverted by a lowly, humble person who comes on a mission to reconcile humankind with their creator and to bear witness to peace, justice, mercy and compassion throughout the world.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the point I am wanting to make here this morning is this - the coming of Jesus isn’t just about a starry-eyed, warm-hearted event that took place in stable one cold night in Bethlehem. Mark’s declaration by-passes all that to get to the real point.

And the truth of the matter is that the declaration Mark makes about Jesus is actually quite shocking. The Jesus Mark bears witness to is rather confronting. The ministry of Jesus that Mark presents is somewhat subversive. And from Rome’ perspective, this all amounts to high treason.

So, what are we to make of this high treason today?

We do not live under the tyranny of ancient Rome. Hence it’s not a crime to speak of “Good News” or to declare Jesus Christ as the Son of God. But we are still called to bear witness to the coming of Christ as marking the beginning of something radically new, both in our relationship with God and in our understanding of the world around us.

For the essence of the “Good News” is that, in the coming Jesus, God makes a radical claim on our lives. In the life of Jesus, God makes a far-reaching claim on the world around us. With this “Good News” God offers a completely new way of living that invites our whole-hearted commitment, not to a particular ideology or worldview, but to the practice of unconditional love where even the most forgotten people have a place.

Indeed in Jesus, God inaugurates a new way of being that goes beyond blind allegiance to particular political systems. It supersedes uncompromising subscriptions to certain economic systems.

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In Jesus, God calls us to peace and reconciliation. God implores us to embody justice and mercy. God longs for us to continually say “yes” to the One from who we came and to whom we will go.

And you know, I believe this is what it’s all about. Even if it does involve committing high treason, receiving the Good News of Jesus Christ is the best and most important thing of all. The person whose birth we celebrate in just two weeks time is what really matters.

And it’s this conviction, it’s this truth that needs to inform us in everything we do - whether it’s making sense of the new legislation recognizing same-sex marriage, whether its struggling to understand the current debate on euthanasia, trying to get our get our heads around Middle Eastern issues, especially Donald Trump’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, grappling with how to best to raise our children and grandchildren, dealing with the reality that will all get old and one day will die or simply making a decision about just who to vote for next week for those residing in the seat of Bennelong.

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”

As Christmas approaches this is what it’s all about. In the eyes those who seek self-fulfillment, power, prestige, prosperity or fame this may all appear to be somewhat inconsequential, ridiculous or even subversive.

But this is God’s message for us today.

Friends, listen to it, receive it and live it!

Amen.



